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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 001285

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/07/2018

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SUBJECT: RUSSIA CONTINUES TO OVERPLAY HAND WITH GEORGIA:  
WARNS OF DANGERS OF WAR

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns: Reasons 1.4 (b, d).

11. (C) Summary: In the May 6 wake of FM Lavrov's "extreme concern" over Georgian military intentions, Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin warned the Ambassador that Saakashvili was unstable; while Russia did not seek conflict, if Georgia was intent on provoking hostilities, Russia would respond. Russian foreign policy experts joined official condemnation of Georgian military rhetoric, with Russia's NATO Ambassador Rogozin blaming NATO for Georgia's plans to retake Abkhazia by force. While Lavrov denied receiving an Abkhaz proposal for extending Russian military protection to Abkhazia, saber rattling continued, with a senior Russian military official charging that Russia would not permit any further Georgian overflights, including UAVs. Painting the current escalation as a direct result of NATO MAP deliberations, Russian analysts charge that military defeat may nevertheless be a domestic electoral boon for Saakashvili, who they believe overestimates U.S. support for Georgian military adventurism. While some analysts recognize that Russia has fallen back into the role of international bad guy, there is broad support for Russia's expanded engagement with Abkhazia and interest in provoking a Georgian overreaction that might doom its MAP bid. End Summary

GOR: Saakashvili Causes Concern  
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12. (C) Russian officials have stepped up warnings over the alleged unpredictability of the Georgian leadership and, returning to a favorite theme, the "emotional instability" of Saakashvili. On May 6, Foreign Minister Lavrov reacted to Georgian public statements by noting his "extreme concern" over Georgia's predisposition to forcing a confrontation, pointing to "more and more worrisome facts" suggesting Georgia's intent to settle the conflict with Abkhazia by force. Lavrov called upon those countries "who still have some influence on the Georgian leadership" to dissuade Georgia from its military path. On the evening of May 6, the Ambassador warned Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin against letting events spin out of control and urged Russia to moderate its rhetoric. In response, Karasin accused Saakashvili of being unstable and warned that the Georgian President should be careful. While Russia was not interested in an armed conflict, and had taken discrete steps to improve the bilateral relationship, if Georgia was determined to precipitate hostilities, Russia would respond. The common theme among leading Russian analysts with whom we spoke on May 6 was that Saakashvili believed he could "get away with war," given sustained U.S. support for Georgia's "aggressive" policy towards Russia; a potentially fatal miscalculation, in the eyes of the Russian analysts.

13. (SBU) The drumbeat of anti-Saakashvili rhetoric continues from other official quarters. Russia's Ambassador to NATO Dmitriy Rogozin lashed out against Georgian Integration Minister Yakobashvili's comment that Georgia was close to war, putting the blame on Georgia for the heightened tensions. Rogozin charged Georgia with implementing a

cynical plan "approved by several sponsors" to blame Russia for increased tensions in the zone of conflict, relying upon a "massive propaganda barrage" to justify its actions. Rogozin accused Georgia of seeking to seize Sukhumi by force, with Georgian special forces "trained by NATO instructors," with the potential to produce "serious bloodletting." Other Russian experts have joined Rogozin in blaming NATO for Georgian adventurism, with the head of the European Institute's European Security Department Dmitriy Danilov maintaining that Georgia was the first step on the path towards NATO's domination of the Caucasus.

14. (SBU) In less inflammatory language, Duma International Relations Chairman Konstantin Kosachev blamed the absence of a viable political process in resolving the frozen conflicts on Georgia, but reiterated that Russia had to avoid being an aggressor. Dismissing Georgian accusations of the annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Kosachev stressed that Russia was operating within international law and remained focused on separating the parties and creating the basis for a political resolution of the conflict.

#### Military Saber Rattling

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15. (SBU) While Lavrov moved quickly to deny receiving any proposal from Abkhaz Foreign Minister Shamba to put Abkhaz territory under the military control of the Russian Ministry of Defense, in a May 7 "Kommersant" interview Major General Vladimir Shamanov added fuel to the fire by stating that Russia would no longer permit Georgian military aircraft from flying over the zone of conflict, even if unmanned. Labeling

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the UAVs a "naked provocation," Shamanov underscored that they were a violation of the 1994 Moscow Agreement. Describing the zone of conflict as being "in the field of vision" of the Ministry of Defense, Shamanov asserted that all measures were being taken to secure the territory. The article goes on to detail the range of forces and equipment (including 400 airborne troops), quoting an anonymous source in the Ministry that "our boys are not going there to sunbathe and swim in the sea. They have a clear task: to respond instantly to any act of aggression from the Georgian forces, to give an adequate and firm response to any attempt to use force against Russian peacekeepers and Russian citizens located in Abkhazia."

#### NATO is the Audience

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16. (C) Russian analysts underscore the centrality of NATO MAP to the current spate of tensions. Both Carnegie's Deputy Director Aleksey Arbatov and political-military analyst Vladimir Dvorkin stressed to us that Russian actions in Georgia were designed to demonstrate clearly for a German and French audience all the problems NATO would inherit if it were to shelter Georgia. According to "Russia in Global Affairs" Editor Fyodor Lukyanov, the possibility of miscalculation is high. Lukyanov argued that Saakashvili recognized that the opportunity to reestablish Georgian control over the separatist regions had slipped away, and may have determined that provoking a war with Russia "even if it meant defeat" could yield sufficient political benefit at home. In the event of a military conflict, Lukyanov maintained, Saakashvili would be able to tell his domestic constituency that he did all he could to prevent Russian annexation of the separatist regions. Unless Georgia could be convinced that it must choose between territorial integrity and NATO membership, Lukyanov concluded that the possibility for armed conflict was real. Director of the U.S. Institute Sergey Rogov echoed the widely shared opinion of Russian officials that Saakashvili overestimated U.S. support in the event of Georgian-initiated hostilities.

17. (C) Also linking the current tension to NATO MAP and the

Georgian electoral calendar, MGIMO's Vladimir Degoyev argued that Saakashvili's career depended upon defending Georgia's territorial integrity, despite the fact that Abkhazia was "long gone," with both separatist territories having crossed "the point of no return." Because Saakashvili was concerned about other "unhappy" ethnic groups in Georgia that could start agitating once Abkhazia formally broke away, the Georgian President sought NATO membership "at any price" as the binding force for Georgia. With the May 21 parliamentary elections fast approaching, Degoyev and other Russian analysts argue that Saakashvili would use the anti-Russia card again to unite the public behind him. Since Russia would do everything to stop NATO "encroachment," while Georgia would do everything not to formally lose Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Degoyev concluded that it was "anyone's guess" where the conflict would end.

#### Overplaying Its Hand

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18. (C) A few experts are willing to acknowledge that Russia is overplaying its hand, with potentially dangerous consequences. Sergey Markedonov of the Institute for Political and Military Analysis criticized the GOR for succumbing to Georgia's "game" and for allowing Saakashvili to succeed in making Georgia's internal dispute a Russian-Georgian affair or -- worse -- a dispute between Russia and the West. Russia easily fell into the role of "bad guy," Markedonov told us, and had "hastily" adopted "unnecessary" measures, such as the removal of the 1996 CIS sanctions against Abkhazia, which had been defunct in practice since 2000. The official announcement of the pullout only solidified an anti-Russia group among the Western countries, he said. Markedonov, who visited Georgia in early April, argued that more balanced policies by Russia could have complicated Saakashvili's political standing, given the emergence of a real Georgian opposition and the perceptible weakening of Saakashvili's support base in Tbilisi and Batumi. While questioning how realistic a MAP bid was in December, particularly with Russia's friend, Berlusconi, back on the world political stage, Markedonov predicted that Russia would intensify its efforts to "legitimize" the Abkhazian regime.

#### Comment

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19. (C) While engendering international criticism, the series of Russian steps to expand engagement with the frozen

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conflict territories, to increase peacekeeping forces, and to saber rattle are well received domestically. While Russian officials maintain that Russia is not looking for a fight, the volatility they attribute to Saakashvili is matched here with at least a verbal readiness to rise to any challenge. While preoccupied with a domestic political transition, with today's inauguration of President Medvedev launching an untested power "tandem," the Russian leadership remains singularly focused on denying Saakashvili a NATO MAP. The more tensions escalate over Abkhazia, the greater the potential they see for Saakashvili's reactions to scare off European support for Georgian NATO membership.

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